

VEC: Local Council Representation Review. July 2019

I am writing to urge that during this review, the VEC:

- Increase the number of councillors we have in Banyule, to at least nine.
- Create three multi-member wards, with three or four members in each ward.
- Rename wards with Aboriginal place names

Below I have provided some explanation for each of these three points.

I have lived in Banyule for about 14 years. I live here with my husband and three children. We use the local state school and have been renters and ratepayers at various stages. We have used the local kindergartens and been active volunteers during that time. The population of Banyule is growing: I see lots of high density housing developments in the business areas, which is a great use of land. I see lots of subdivision in the suburban areas, including Viewbank where I live. I am also aware of lots of families that have multiple generations under one roof. So, the growth in population has taken many forms and is not always easy to detect. Population growth is the strongest reason that I see for increasing councillor numbers.

I think that if we had more councillors, there would be increased opportunity for the public to engage with their local councillor around concerns and ideas they wish to share. Australians are largely disengaged from politics, and council level is a good way of beginning positive engagement with voters. Because councillors are poorly paid, the work pattern has been such that most councillors have other jobs in order to supplement their incomes. I understand from attending a VEC information night that the VEC are unable to increase councillor wages, so perhaps by increasing councillor numbers, this is a way of increasing councillor accessibility. As the population grows, it only seems fair that such a poorly paid person would be able to share the workload with their colleagues, in order to do the job properly. I have never met my local ward councillor. I have met and sighted councillors from other wards at community events. They appear to be very busy and perhaps overworked and overstretched. They also have families to attend to and it is often only through goodwill that they are working outside of hours to meet local commitments. There are some that don't have other job and some that have full time jobs in addition to their councillor roles. There appears to be an uneven spread of availability.

The added benefit of having more councillors to represent voters, is that councillor life will be more attractive to those considering representing our community. At the last council election, some of the wards were uncontested, which meant that the same people retained their positions. People have asked why no one else tried to get elected and why there are no young or so few female representatives on council. The reality is that many women in Banyule are carers for their children, parents, or people with disabilities. We are lower income earners in general. There are fewer young people or financially capable women who are in a position to become councillors. The trend of who "can" become a councillor in Banyule, because they can afford the time and/or pay-cut, appears to be older white men. Men who perhaps bought in the area many years ago when mortgages were more affordable? So, an increase in Banyule's number of councillors could make the role more attractive, and hence bring more diversity (and better representation) to the panel.

In addition to population growth, I would like to mention the following reasons for increased councillor numbers:

- Geographic size and topography: Banyule has multiple vulnerable water and eco systems. Banyule is home to fragile areas of bio-diversity that need urgent and

specialised attention due to the effects of climate change. Because of the NE Link, population growth, habitat loss and pollution increase, I believe that the council needs to increase its representation in order to spend more time on these matters.

- Socio-economic disparity: Banyule has a lot of wealthy areas and it is not atypical to sell one's house for a million dollars in many suburbs here. We have some extremely wealthy residents living in multi-million dollar homes (Eaglemont, Lower Plenty, East Ivanhoe) and large pockets of poverty (Heidelberg West, Heidelberg Heights, the eastern most part of Macleod) where many families are largely reliant on Centrelink and living below the breadline. We have asylum seekers, migrants, university students (regional and international), grandparents staying for long periods from overseas and the sometimes transient, socially disadvantaged military families who work at the Simpson Barracks for 2-3 years at a time. So, although we are not Victoria's most diverse population, we do have sections of special need in Banyule's population and perhaps many residents of Banyule that are not voters (but still use the services of Banyule Council). We need more councillors to serve this diverse and large group.
- Banyule is at the higher end of the "voter to councillor ratio" when compared with other councils across the state. Granted, some of these other councils are larger geographically or have more socio-economic disadvantage, but given Banyule's consistent population growth and building development, *and* that this review won't take place for another twelve years, I think it highly prudent to increase the number of councillors by at least two, up to nine in total.
- Banyule is in many ways representative of the way many Australians live: reliance on cars, big homes with large heating/cooling bills, high use of plastics in the household, generous creators of landfill and food waste. We are largely high carbon emitters here in Banyule. Banyule has the wealth, strength and capacity to be leaders in becoming carbon neutral. This is a major and urgent project which will only be aided by more councillors coming on board.

Having multi-member wards is a better safeguard for community members whose concerns may not be given due attention by councillors. I also think a three or four multi member wards would allow larger projects to be undertaken, such as caring for the Banyule wetlands while the NE Link is being built or turning our attention to carbon output of our homes and businesses. If we have multi-member wards, there is a greater chance that someone in my ward will represent my views. In multi-member wards there is also a greater chance of increasing diversity. In current Victorian multi-member wards, there is a higher representation of women. I think that we need to have a better representation of our community, so this means making sure more women get elected and minority groups such as a representative from Banyule's Somali population.

I do not have a preference for where boundary lines are drawn, however I urge you to consider making sure each of the wards has a good share of green space (parks, creeks, rivers, reserves) and a good spread of socio-economic backgrounds (so that we do not have a "poor" ward and a "rich" ward). It would also be great (but perhaps less important) if each of the three wards had a good mix of activity centres (e.g. business/industry/retail).

Could you please change the ward names to Aboriginal words and/or place names. There is not enough recognition of indigenous people in this part of Victoria.

**As a side note, I would also like to add feedback about how the VEC has gone about this review. I hope the VEC considered ensuring resources were provided in languages other than English and if your websites are accessible (e.g. sight impairment). I think that the VEC has a responsibility to cater for all Victorians. I hope that the review was advertised equitably across the population groups (platforms that everyone uses, not just the local rag). There is talk that the existing council largely does not want change, so leaving it to the council to disseminate information/advertising through their means may not be adequate or non-partisan. I think the language used in the guide and face to face presentation was straightforward and the feedback website is also easy to use.